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Recommended Citation

Maine Department of Labor and Bureau of Labor Standards, "Occupational Fatality Report #1301: Dying Alone on the Job, 2013" (2013). *Labor Standards Documents*. Paper 11.
http://statedocs.maine.gov/bls_docs/11

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Occupational Fatality Report #1301

Dying Alone On the Job

January 2013

Submitted by
Maine Department of Labor
Bureau of Labor Standards

OCCUPATIONAL FATALITY REPORT

DYING ALONE ON THE JOB

THE LONE WORKER

A person is alone at work when he or she is on their own, when they cannot be seen or heard by another person and when they cannot expect a visit from another person for some time. The person working alone may be an employer, employee, contractor or be self-employed. In some situations, working alone happens only for short periods of time while in others it may be the permanent arrangement.¹

"Lone workers" may not be unique to Maine, but their numbers are significant; in 2008, 56 percent of firms and establishments in the state had just one to four employees. With a deep tradition of independence and "Yankee self-reliance," many in the Pine Tree State savor the pride, satisfaction and freedom that come from working successfully on their own. Jobs involving outdoor work and/or recreational services like farming, clamping, lobstering, fishing, logging, forestry, trapping and recreational guiding are typically solitary, and coupled with Maine's small population and large expanse, even the "non-outdoor" occupations can lend themselves to isolation. Electricians, plumbers, equipment installers, repairmen, small gas and convenience store tenders, custodians, security guards, telecommunications workers and others often operate in lone situations simply because there are fewer neighbors and co-workers and/or greater distances between jobsites.

LONE WORKER INCIDENTS

Along with its rewards, working alone can also have some undesired effects, including the nature of accidents and fatalities that occur to lone workers. As shown in Table 1, 14 jobsite fatalities involving lone workers were reported in Maine from 2009 through 2012.

Table 1. Lone Worker Fatalities Involving Non-roadway Accidents in Maine 2009–2012

| Date | Occupation | Accident |
|----------------|-----------------|---|
| January 2009 | Logger | Crushed by a falling tree |
| July 2009 | Clam Digger | Drowned |
| November 2009 | Clam Digger | Drowned |
| January 2011 | Store Owner | Fell from flight of stairs |
| June 2011 | Masonry Laborer | Fell from work scaffolding |
| July 2011 | Farmer | Tractor/tree accident |
| September 2011 | Electrician | Electrocuted working on an equipment power cord |
| September 2011 | Forester | Drowned |
| February 2012 | Logger | Crushed by secondary falling tree |
| April 2012 | Lobsterman | Found floating dead in a bay |
| April 2012 | Logger | Crushed by a falling tree |
| August 2012 | Eel Fisherman | Fell more than 30 feet onto a ledge |
| December 2012 | Lab Technician | Fell more than 50 feet from a man lift |

The details of both these cases and similar research² suggest that, while formidable to begin with, occupational hazards escalate for the person working alone. Capable as he or she may be, the lone worker arrives at any jobsite with only one set of eyes and ears, one set of thoughts and plans and only one mind to ascertain and analyze the situations he or she encounters. The isolated worker has no one else to steady a ladder, to hold a safety line, to help lift a heavy object, to warn them when a situation turns dangerous or to provide immediate help when bad things happen. Moreover, when the worst happens to the lone worker there are no witnesses, often leading to confusion later about how or why the accident happened and what could be done to prevent it from happening to someone else. When lone workers die on the job, they often leave friends, loved ones and co-workers with concerns about the nature of their death and questions about what might have caused or prevented it.

FOR THE EMPLOYEE WORKING ALONE

There are a number of things employers can do to lessen the chances of lone worker injuries or fatalities.^{1,3,4} Obviously the best move is to eliminate the lone worker situation if possible. If that is not possible, try to lessen or reduce worker isolation. For example, pair two or more employees who work in close proximity, even though their tasks may be different, so that they coordinate their appointments, perhaps travel together, and generally keep an eye on one another during the work day.

When a lone worker situation is simply unavoidable, a number of procedures should be put in place to make the situation safer:

- Do a thorough risk assessment of the lone worker's job and then identify and implement appropriate mitigation/control procedures and policies. These should be signed-off by the employee and his/her supervisor or manager and updated whenever work conditions change significantly.
- Make sure the employee has adequate training in job planning, understanding hazards, situational awareness, expecting and avoiding dangers, "reporting in," emergency/incident response, emergency first aid, and other ways to prepare and know whom to contact for help.
- Provide good communication/contact/tracking equipment, for example, mobile phones, GPS locating devices, conditional alarms that require lone worker follow-up and "man down" alarms. However, do not over-rely on technology or expect it to fully "solve the problems" of worker isolation.
- Make sure that the employee's equipment and supplies are kept in order. Do not rely on the employee alone to assure that his/her work equipment is safe and communication/safety equipment is on hand and serviceable.
- Create a set travel plan or itinerary for the lone worker that is shared between the employee, manager and the home office and require the worker to advise others whenever there is a change.
- Establish a procedure for employees to check-in at assigned intervals and to report when they are off-schedule or overdue.

FOR THE SELF-EMPLOYED LONE WORKER

If you are self-employed or work independently, you can be even more vulnerable to your work hazards. Here are several ways you might reduce the likelihood of severe injury or even fatality as you work alone:

- Whether it be a law enforcement officer, a spouse, a good friend or other reliable person, always let someone know where you are working and when you should be expected to return.
- Take fully-charged, serviceable communication devices with you. If an emergency alarm, mobile phone or other such device has service in that area, take it and know how to use it.
- Set up a check-in call with your contact person at designated time(s) during your work day and call them when your schedule changes or if you are overdue.
- On a regular basis, ask another capable person to take a look at your communication devices, hazardous equipment and safety gear. Take advantage of a second set of eyes to make sure your gear is safe and operational.
- Don't take chances—even chances you might normally take when someone else is there. Shortcuts are just more risky when you work alone and the best way is the right way.
- Take whatever extra time is needed to reduce any margin for error and to do each task with 100 percent safety.
- Don't set yourself up to be hurrying against darkness or a deadline.
- Be aware of your own physical condition as you work. Don't work when you're exhausted.
- Be aware of your surroundings, especially note any changes as you work; if that little voice tells you something is not quite right, stop and pay attention to it. For example, check the weather, pay attention to visibility if working at dusk, or simply stop to look around to see if other hazards may have developed.
- When work conditions change, don't just plow ahead. Stop and wait until you have time to completely think things through.
- Your most important safety tool is your brain. You are smart enough to do the job on your own – be savvy enough to do it safely, too, so that you make it home every time.

Citations:

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2. WCB Reports and related newspaper articles
3. "Good Practice: Lone Working." Institute of Occupational Safety and Health., The Grange, Highfield Drive, Wigston, Leicestershire, UK, 2009.
4. "Working Alone Safely – A Guide for Employers and Employees." Government of Alberta, Canada, Employment and Immigration, September, 2000.

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